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ABSTRACT

The author describes some of the characteristics of gifted students, and considers components of effective gifted programs. Noted among student characteristics are a heightened awareness of the world, openness about feelings and emotions, curiosity, imagination, and independence in thinking. The author feels that gifted programs should include use of community resources, direct exposure to experts, group and individual conferences to explore feelings, and parent support. (SW)

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WHAT'S IT REALLY LIKE

TEACHING GIFTED STUDENTS?

By Betty Chasteen

Keynote address presented at the
Third Annual Missouri Gifted Conference
October 25, 1981
Jefferson City, Missouri

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What a dream -- teaching gifted students! No more problems motivating students because those kids will really be anxious to learn. No more discipline problems because gifted students are always the well-behaved pupils.

These ideals and other misconceptions face the teacher beginning a program for gifted students regardless of the format which has been established for a school district's commitment to meeting the needs of gifted students. The anxiety and uncertainty which accompanies a new assignment will send the teacher of the gifted to many sources for information on existing programs and characteristics to expect of selected students.

Unfortunately, descriptions of programs seldom outline the pitfalls and possible failures with which the new program amy be confronted. And characteristic descriptions of gifted students seldom present the complete picture. What is presented is the ideal program with the many personal characteristics which may or may not be a part of the total personality.

After two years of active involvement as a committee member in planning a gifted program for our school district, I suddenly found myself wanting to be the selected teacher to implement our plans. Excitement didn't overcome the anxieties of a new teaching position with an entire group of above-average, intelligent, and academically-oriented students. What's more, the program we had designed and planned was to center on student interest. Not knowing who the students would be certainly made identification of student interests an impossible task. Yet the days were rushing by and, it would soon be time to launch our new program.

Hoping to learn more about the kind of student to expect, much time was spent in reading about gifted children, attending conferences and workshops related to gifted education, and seeking out teachers experienced in working with gifted students. It was difficult to find answers to the many questions racing through my mind, but I began to learn many things about these special children as a result

of my research. What I eventually learned from actual experience didn't necessarily reflect the research, hwoever.

A gifted child will have a special sense of wonder -- a heightened awareness of the world around him. This just means he will wonder where he left his books or who took his notes. She will wonder how often she can manage to spend the day hiking in the woods or trying to catch a frog for observation. Or she may just wonder if she could go to the rest room again for the third time within an hour.

A gifted student is open to his/her inner feelings and emotions and will be assertive about those feelings. This characteristic is readily noticed because she will talk incessantly and never hear anyone's reply, because, if she ever does stop talking, she'll be busy thinking about what to say next or planning her strategy to gain approval through flattery.

These students are curious and want to explore everything with an adventuresome spirit. Of course, he will be stage-shy when he has to perform before a group of classmates. And she'll be scared beyond reason when she learns the cave we are planning to explore has no lighting. Or, provide them with the unique experience of observing the movements of an earthworm, and the girls will begin squirming and quealing in their anticipation of adventure.

Imagination -- that picturesque, vivid, colorful thinking power -- is definitely a possession of gifted students. However, don't be surprised at how well they have learned to stifle their imaginative output. Their colorful imagery may be displayed by several stick figures made with a black marker and accompanied by several figures which are scratched out for a variety of reasons.

Certainly gifted students are problem solvers. They solve problems in a creative manner continuously -- just like miniature authorities. They know more about any subject than a teacher can imagine. But getting them to support their solutions with factual information and/or observations is an unending task.

Taking notes and referencing facts is a difficult assignment and requires more effort than most of these students have ever needed to expend. Gifted students are independent thinkers. That just means they think for themselves and do not wish to bother with established authorities. It is easier to know all the answers than it is to think of the questions to ask.

Being divergent thinkers, these students will go off in many different directions -- physically, if possible. They'll be more interested in what is happening outside the classroom because they will not want to miss anything.

The gifted child seeks originality in his environment. Watch out for the snakes, mice and hamsters you'll be adopting because Mom said, "Absolutely not!" and his classroom teacher felt the science table was already too full.

Students who are gifted have a tendency to play with ideas. She'll try anything in order to convince the teacher that she needs more time to work at the computer.

In reality, gifted students are not the super human beings that are described by psychologists and well-known educators. They are just kids! They aren't necessarily the students with the best grades or the students who write the most creative stories. Some of them are even discipline problems in the classroom. It is true that some of them are intuitive, but all of them will not possess instinctive knowledge. Some of them will be able to synthesize and create new products from their experiences and imaginations, but this is not true of all of them. Many of them will be perfectionists and strive to do their best at all times, but some will be sloppy, careless and disinterested.

However, like any group of children, gifted students are really lovable, enthusiastic individuals who have special needs because they have special talents an abilities. We, as educators, need to realize their humanistic qualities and help them strengthen their weaknesses as they identify their interests and develop their special abilities. The danger is in identifying them as gifted. Once a

student has been branded, GIFTED, expectations become unrealistic. Classroom teachers and parents begin expecting fantastic responses and products from them all the time. Comparisons are frequently made with other bright students who were not identified as gifted. Pressures on the individual gifted child begin to mount. It becomes the task of the "gifted" teacher and the gifted program to overcome these super human expectations and, yet, to encourage the best possible performance from each child.

A gifted program has the responsibility of developing some of the characteristics that are assumed to be part of a gifted child's personality. The program must be tailored to meet individual student needs and separate school situations. Challenges can be offered within the framework of individual interests. Children can be introduced to a wide variety of experiences which will allow interests to surface. If the program can provide the necessary resources and services for successful learning and if students can be directed to setting goals for their own learning experiences, they will become more curious and observant of their environment. They will begin to recognize real problems they can solve and have an opportunity to seek possible solutions with a purpose in mind. When given the chance to solve real problems, the students should have the follow-up experience of trying their proposed solutions and facing the fact that their solution may be a failure.

Good communication skills become a real necessity for these students. Research and possible solutions to problems are of no value if the researcher or scientist is unable to communicate clear findings to other people. These students need to learn how to write up observations and how to support experimentation with factual knowledge and logical analysis. They need many occasions to share their projects with others through interest groups, parent groups, special programs and other opportunities.

Research skills are very important to these students. It is to their advantage to recognize that research isn't limited to reading in the library or experimenting in a laboratory. There is a wide variety of resources within each community. Pride in one's surroundings helps develop positive self-images. A community may have limited access to art museums or concerts, but there are many other things to offer their students. There is the local cemetery where history is recorded on tombstones. Lonely residents in local nursing facilities have ample time to make history a true-life adventure. Ponds and caves have many interesting secrets to explore. A gifted program is an ideal place to provide a living, learning environment which allows students to explore, experiment and create.

In meeting intellectual needs of these students, encouragement should be given to creativity and self-expression. At the same time, these students should be exposed to knowledge in the arts and sciences and provided with models of gifted persons in these fields. Whenever possible, direct exposure to experts within their areas of interest should be arranged. This may just mean arranging for another teacher or staff member to work briefly with the students. The teacher of the gifted may need to exchange teaching or assume other responsibilities in order to arrange these meetings.

Basic needs of gifted students will include the affective domain as well as the cognitive domain. They will need help in understanding and adjusting to their special abilities. They need opportunities to be self-assertive and assistance in clarifying their values. Through group and individual conferences, they need to explore their feelings and recognize their own potential. They need to learn to accept a challenge with the knowledge they will not always be successful. Self-direction should be an ultimate goal. Through a student-centered program, they can become active in setting goals and evaluating. Yet we need to minimize pressures on these students as much as possible.

One of the more gratifying aspects of a gifted program is the spill-over effect

on the rest of the school population. Special projects can carry-over into the classrooms. Presentations related to interests can include other children in the student body who might benefit from the exposure to new ideas. Many special events which can be planned to enrich the gifted student's background, can be presented to the entire student body. The gifted program can become the main source for planning special school programs and presentations.

It has been recognized that the teacher of gifted students is vital to successful learning experiences. Many "gifted teachers" are not prepared to teach gifted students. Teachers of the gifted do not have it easier as is often supposed by other staff members. Gifted students are often the most difficut and challenging students with which a teacher deals. Often these students have never had to put forth much effort to excel in the regular classroom. They frequently need to be taught how to accept a challenge and do something with it. The teacher who chooses to teach these special students must have the desire and the mental and emotional stamina to be effective. This teacher must be prepared to accept the envy of other staff members, knowing they do not understand what it is like to plan for and work with gifted students every day.

If a program is a pull-out program, keeping the rest of the staff informed becomes a monumental task. However, it is not an impossible one. Every opportunity to meet with staff members should be taken. Eat lunch with a different group of teachers each day. Attend grade level or department meetings, staff meetings, and parent meetings. Become involved in curriculum development and attempt to coordinate program goals with curriculum at varying grade levels. Write a monthly newsletter to inform parents and staff of activities in the gifted program. Be certain classroom teachers who have students in the gifted program get a copy of the newsletter. Inform other teachers of special activities and, when possible, invite other interested students to participate in special presentations and programs. Exchange teaching

with classroom teachers when they have a special interest or hobby that relates with a student interest. Schedule regular conferences with classroom teachers to discuss individual students, their progress and any problems which have been observed. Encourage students to tell their teachers what they did while attending the gifted class. A simple note written at the end of each class session and handed to the classroom teacher is well worth the time it requires.

Parents of gifted kids form the most supportive group we have going for us. They have been aware of the special talents and abilities which their child possesses even before the child entered our classrooms. Many parents have become disillusioned with our school programs and discouraged when their child came home suffering from boredom. When their child has become disinterested in learning after a few years in a traditional setting, these parents have started expressing concern and anxiety. Therefore, they are anxious to have programs that will help their children develop potential and encourage them to maintain an interest in learning. Parents will support gifted education, but they often are seeking some direction.

When a new gifted program is incorporated in a school district, parents are the first to express gratitude and relief because the uniqueness of the gifted child has been recognized. Most people do not want to acknowledge the problems faced by parents of brighter students. These people feel the parents of gifted children have no real problems at all when they compare them to the problems of the average or below average student who is struggling to keep up on a daily basis. Just giving parents of gifted students an opportunity to meet together and discuss common problems. is a positive action.

Parent groups serve many other useful purposes also. They know their children and their special interests and abilities. Parents can be very helpful in setting up special activities and programs for the students. They have many suggestions that they know their children will find interesting. And they can assist each other

in planning special events for their children. A parent group is also a logical audience for displaying student projects or giving special recognition to students.

A very important consideration of a gifted program is the evaluation of that program. It is to our advantage to seek the opinions of people who are directly involved in the gifted program -- students, parents, classroom teachers, other support staff members, and administrators. Improvement can be planned when we recognize our areas of weakness.

Students can be asked to evaluate the program at the end of each class session. Journals can be kept and students encouraged to express their opinions through the journals. Students can be involved in setting goals at the beginning of each class session and these goals can then serve as a basis for evaluation at the end of the day. Often students will have helpful recommendations to make when they have identified a problem or have been critical of a particular class session. These students can also evaluate over a longer period of time such as a semester evaluation of program goals. Since they should be involved in setting goals at the beginning of each school year, they can evaluate our progress in line with the goals they help to establish.

Staff members should be involved in evaluating the gifted program. If staff members feel something needs to be changed, they should be willing to express their opinions and even make suggestions for improving the program. Criticism from staff members may not always be constructive, however, the teacher responsible for the gifted program can sift out the constructive suggestions and review the possible causes for any negativism. If something can be done to eliminate the negative aspects, the program directors have an opportunity to make those corrections when they have been made aware of the need.

Parents usually are not as critical in their evaluations as the other groups. This is probably due to the fact that they are thankful something different is being done for their children. However, they are honest, and giving them the chance to evaluate the program, opens the way for some valuable suggestions.

Nothing is impossible with gifted students. The problems that are associated with gifted children are usually related to the fact that these children are kids first and gifted second.

Teachers who work with gifted students must be prepared to accept them as the eager, but human individuals they are, and, at the same time, recognize the envy of other teachers, remembering that those teachers really do not understand what is it like to work with gifted individuals full time. However, teaching gifted students is one of the most challenging assignments a teacher can have and, thus, one of the most rewarding.